monuments

LEEWARDEN

Oldehove, Leaning Tower of Leeuwarden
PREFACE
For Leeuwarden, the Oldehove was a beautiful dream that turned into a nightmare. In 1529, the city hoped to build an imposing tower, perhaps even the tallest in the wide surrounding area. When construction on the Oldehove had only reached a height of 10 metres, the tower began to lean to one side. Architect Jacob van Aaken and his successor did what they could, but in the end the builders had to stop after 39 metres. There was no saving it.

The Oldehove is thus a failed tower. Not only does it lean, it curves as well. The tower also has a tendency to crack. For the past five centuries, the city council has had to perform countless restorations and repairs to preserve the building. At times it had to put up fences around it due to falling masonry. Leeuwarden could have saved a lot of money and effort by tearing down this useless building. The shame and disappointment of the lopsidedness would then have been long forgotten. Yet the building still stands, proud as ever.

The Oldehove was preserved because the people of Leeuwarden have come to love their tower with a passion. It has grown into an icon, used in countless wedding photos, postcards and souvenirs, and it regularly turns up in the obituaries. Many Leeuwarden residents say they even get homesick if they have not seen the Oldehove for a couple of weeks. The tower has become the subject of numerous myths, stories, jokes and songs. Its leaning shape fascinates many tourists and other visitors. The monument, as it stands today, might well make people from Leeuwarden happier than the huge monster Van Aaken had originally planned.
‘Fortunately I can visit the Oldehove tower in Leeuwarden’

De Oldehove: beklim ‘m, nu!

(The Oldehove: Climb it now!)
The Oldehove has stood for almost five hundred years and is located on a spot that has been inhabited since the beginning of the Christian era. The area around the tower is of great historical significance to Leeuwarden.

At the beginning of the Christian era, the landscape in and around Leeuwarden looked very different than it does today. A deep estuary ran north to south from the Wadden Sea through the middle of Friesland. This ‘Middle Sea’ bordered the area where the Oldehove now stands. The land adjacent to the water was slightly higher than the surrounding landscape, an attractive place to live and suitable for agriculture and livestock farming. Around the year 100 AD, farmers raised this land even higher, so that a little terp (artificial mound) was created. On this they built a large wooden farmhouse. Generations of farmers lived there. They continued to raise the little mound. After the Roman period the place was temporarily uninhabited, but later new farmers came and constructed a high, extensive hill to live on. Which was necessary, too, because at that time the Middle Sea was becoming broader and rougher. In the seventh and eighth centuries, a small village with several farms was established. The inhabitants were forced to convert to Christianity by the new rulers, the Franks. Boniface probably landed at the Oldehove mound in 753 on his way to Dokkum.

Archaeologists believe that in the ninth or tenth century a church was built on the mound for the first time. It was most likely a wooden building that around 1000 AD made way for a church built with volcanic tuff stone from the Eifel Mountains. St. Vitus was made the patron saint. In those days, it must have been a robust and expensive building that gave Leeuwarden an important ecclesiastical position in Central Friesland. The church was continually rebuilt and renewed in the centuries that followed. Later, another church was built on the mound to the east. The new church was popularly referred to as the Nijehove (New Churchyard). The old St. Vitus Church was called the Oldehove (Old Churchyard). The Grote and the Kleine Kerkstraat
Map with reconstruction of the surroundings of Leeuwarden, 8th-9th century.
(Great and Small Church Streets) were probably named after the St. Vitus Church.

In the fifteenth century, Leeuwarden had grown into a prosperous city with much trade and many crafts. The Middle Sea was in large part silted up and reclaimed. The city was now far from the sea. Although new monasteries and churches were constantly being built in Leeuwarden, the St. Vitus Church remained its most important Christian centre. Around 1510, the church received additional status thanks to a little wooden statue of Mary, to which a miracle was attributed. This statue, ‘Our Lady of Leeuwarden’, was most likely carried throughout the city in an annual procession. The statue survived the Iconoclasm and is now in the St. Dominicus Church.

**St. Vitus**

Vitus lived in Sicily in the fourth century AD. He converted to Christianity as a child and also tried to rid others around him of their pagan faith. He continued his proselytism in Rome, where he became a victim of the persecutions of Christians. After his death, the Catholic church considered him one of the most important saints to be invoked for illnesses. Some of his bones have reportedly been preserved in the monastery of Corvey in Westphalia. The first St. Vitus Church on the Oldehove mound was founded from this monastery. It is likely that Corvey donated a small piece of the relics of St. Vitus to Leeuwarden.

**The Burmania family**

In the thirteenth century, a fortified house was built just south of the St. Vitus Church. The nobles of the Burmania family lived here and for a few centuries were very involved with this church. Their descendants held high positions in Leeuwarden into the nineteenth century. The current BURMANIAHUIS (Burmania House), which today is part of the city hall, dates from 1874.
Artist’s impression of Leeuwarden, circa 1000 AD, with on the left the ‘terp’ (artificial mound) of the Oldehove and on the right the double mound of Nijehove.
Impressions of the reconstruction of the Romanesque St. Vitus Church based on the excavated foundations.
Construction of the Oldehove

It was not safe in Friesland at the end of the fifteenth century. Minor rulers were constantly waging wars. This led to great insecurity and uncertainty for the inhabitants, traders and administrators. It was bad for prosperity. The German duke Albrecht of Saxony, who became Lord of Friesland in 1498, tried to end the unrest. However, revolts and invasions by small mercenary armies plagued the region for a long time. After Albrecht’s death, his sons fortified Leeuwarden’s position. It became the capital of Friesland in 1504, and with the establishment of the Court of Friesland it acquired an important position in administration and jurisdiction. The new *stadhouders* (regents) of Friesland took up residence in the city. This tradition would be followed into the eighteenth century.

In 1515, Friesland came into the hands of Charles V of the Habsburg family, who ruled large areas of Europe, including Holland, Zeeland, Brabant and Flanders. Under his reign, Leeuwarden’s position became even stronger. The city, particularly after the last foreign troops were expelled from the region in 1524, began to really flourish and more money flowed into the municipal treasury. Leeuwarden could now afford to let it be shown far and wide what a powerful, wealthy city it intended to become. There must have been over 5000 inhabitants at the start of the tower’s construction. The city had some forty brick buildings.

Other Western European cities had already preceded Leeuwarden in ostentatious display. Almost all of them had built imposing towers and new churches. They showed on the one hand how devout the population was, and on the other the wealth and power of the local elite. Leeuwarden wanted a splendid new church and imposing tower, too. The city council and the church administration joined forces, as was commonly done in other towns. This initiated the construction of the present-day Oldehovetoren (Oldehove Tower).

Leeuwarden actually already had a considerable number of churches, even more than many other cities, but ‘none of these buildings were
of any particular importance in size and architectural style’, wrote the Leeuwarden historian Wopke Eekhoff in the nineteenth century (although the church joined to the Dominican convent could well be regarded as a prestigious place of worship). ‘The city did not yet have a Chief church building with a large cathedral tower, as were already the pride and joy of many of the fatherland’s cities’. The founders decided to build their new church and tower on the site of the old St. Vitus Church.

It cannot be said with any certainty how all this exactly took place. Almost no reliable documents concerning the Oldehove during the sixteenth century have been preserved. Any historiography of its construction is therefore risky. Historian Wopke Eekhoff has tried to paint a picture of the building of the tower based on written sources, oral tradition and fantasy. His description is still considered to be the most definitive. It is dangerous to follow Eekhoff’s claims blindly, because he was not always correct. His sources are often difficult to verify. There is hardly any other information available, however. So it is worth devoting some attention to his stories.

According to Eekhoff, the city spent years raising funds for the construction of the new church with its tower. By sixteenth-century standards, the structure must have cost a fortune. Clearly the local elite must have put up a considerable amount of money. The Burmanina family made an important contribution. Eekhoff assumed that not only the people of Leeuwarden but also those from far into the surrounding countryside paid, as well. The church was not only the pride of Leeuwarden but of the entire province.

The population paid taxes on things like beer, wine and cloth. According to Eekhoff, from 1520 on half these excises were collected in a fund for the new church. The city owned a brickyard near Schilkampen, on the east side of the city. This so-called St. Vitus or Oldehoofster Tigchelwerk (brickwork) was rented out to a brickmaker on the condition: ‘that for every fire for the profit of the Church, seven thousand bricks would come’. Every time any firing was done, seven thousand bricks had to be given to the Oldehove. Eekhoff also states that so-called ‘brick fines’ were issued for
violations. Offenders had to deliver a large number of bricks, a load of mortar or other building materials for the new tower and church.

A skilled architect was required for this particular structure. Eekhoff called it ‘remarkable, that not one single report about this important matter is to be found in the (archives of the city and the institutions)’. The most important and best-known document that does afford any clarity is a contract drawn up between the city council, the church administration and architect Jacob van Aaken. It was signed in the city hall on 28 May 1529 by clerk Wilcko Folkerts and ‘master Jacob’ himself. Unfortunately, the letter is not an original sixteenth-century document. The text was copied at a later date and contains errors. However, most historians still accept that the contract is largely based on the truth.

The church administration and city council then commissioned Van Aaken to build a new tower and a new church on the ‘Olda Hoff’. ‘Master Jacob’ was hired for six years. He earned eight stuivers for each day of work. He was also given free use of a house and was entitled to a good, new suit every year. On the condition, of course, that the master builder’s achievements would meet the commissioners’ expectations. The commissioners did apparently realise they could not predict whether the church and the tower would actually be finished in six years. They promised Jacob, however, that he could continue building after that time if there was still enough money. The builder was not allowed to accept any other work in the meantime. The contract was ratified with the city seal. Jacob noted at the bottom of the letter that he did not use seals and therefore signed by hand.

According to Eekhoff, Van Aaken’s plan consisted of ‘a broad, tall and tapering tower, built halfway up with baked bricks, the artistic masonry of which would be embellished on all sides with large and small pilasters’. ‘Above the second gallery, which, as the first, was encircled by a decorative stone railing, a wooden spire covered with lead would rise up from the brickwork’. On this would be two or three galleries, ‘which, almost at the height of the brick section, would raise its crown three to four hundred feet above the surface
The finished tower and church in a fictional sketch by Otto Stoelinga from circa 1985 (The Oldehove should have been 120 metres high!).
of the ground’. If Eekhoff’s story were true, the current brickwork would have been 11 to 21 metres higher than is now the case. Then on top of this there would be a considerable spire of the same height. The tower would then be 100 to 120 metres high. If it had worked, Leeuwarden would now have one of the highest church towers in the country. Eekhoff’s description of the building plan goes even further. On the east side ‘a large and very wide, similarly decorated church’ should have been built, that was connected to the tower and embellished in the same manner. Together, the church and tower would have formed an entity ‘so grand and fair, such as few were to be found in the neighbouring regions’.

Experts such as the art historian G.C. Labouchère and the municipal archivist H.M. Mensonides emphasised the characteristics of Dutch style. ‘The tower of the Oldehove very definitely belongs to the family, of which the Dom Tower in Utrecht may be counted as the oldest and most important representative, although, along with this, influences from Brabant are also noticeable’, according to Mensonides. Labouchère calls the Oldehove the first representative in Friesland of the Utrecht group of towers. Mensonides also pointed to the Martini Church in Groningen: ‘we cannot consider it impossible that here, as in so many other matters, the sister city in the North has served as an example’.

Before construction could begin, a good foundation had to be laid. Some historians believe these layers and the bottom part of the tower were already finished before Van Aaken was taken on. Others believe he himself started with the foundation. The location proved to be challenging, because the plans were not to place the tower at the centre of the mound, but on its sloping, western edge. A pit 1.15 metres deep was dug in the mound. In it came eleven alternating layers of hard lime and clay. To give extra strength to the structure, the building was given a notably broad base. Eight protruding buttresses were attached to this.

Architectural historians can see from the building’s current outward appearance that Van Aaken had felt no need to be economical. The embellishments and the size bear witness to a very
ambitious design. This ambition is also reflected in the stairwell. It was not laid with bricks, but stacked with expensive, cut blocks of Bentheim sandstone. The staircase made the northwest side very heavy. The Oldehove was built with red and yellow bricks and got sandstone benches, corner blocks and copings. At the height of the second floor, serrations were made in the eastern masonry. These would be used to connect the church that was to be built later.

Construction proceeded smoothly at first. According to Eekhoff, no one discovered anything had gone wrong until the building was about 10 metres high. That must have been a painful moment. The builders did not stop their work but tried to lay the following bricks in a truly vertical line. This created a curve in the tower. Van Aaken probably hoped the building could be saved this way. However, the tower continued to subside. The tormented architect must have died two to three years after the start of construction. It is said he died of ‘chagrin’. This was often later explained as depression or even suicide, due to the failure of the tower.

Thus around 1532, the city had to find a successor to finish the job. Historian Simon Abbes Gabbema wrote in 1701: ‘and so Kornelis Fredericks was hired for the three remaining years’. There are no reliable documents on this, either. Eekhoff suggests this was the renowned Frederiks van der Gouwe (from Gouda), who had built other churches in the country. When this new architect finished his work, the Oldehove was most likely the tallest building in Friesland. The tower could be seen from miles around and must have been impressive. It is uncertain in which year exactly construction was finished. Estimates vary from 1533 to 1535.

For as long as the Oldehove has existed, there has been speculation about the cause of its lopsidedness. There are many different explanations. The flaw could be due to the sum of these various factors. Three explanations are mentioned most often. First, the building site was not suitable for such a heavy building. The Oldehove does after all stand on a sloping mound. Such a slope may not be a problem on a rocky surface, but it is on a marshy hill. The foundation of lime and clay could also have been an important
reason for the subsidence. It is claimed that precisely because of this hard underground the soil lacked resilience, and the tower was forced to tilt. The foundation would have worked as a cushion, off of which the tower slid to one side. The stairwell of heavy stone is also often seen as the culprit. According to this third explanation, this colossus has pulled the whole building to the northwest.

In addition to the sinking, the tower has struggled since the beginning of construction with a second problem. In the early days the Oldehove was supported by two brick substructures, built independently of each other, that were joined together only at a considerable height. This pillar construction has not necessarily contributed to the tilting, but it has to the continuous rupturing. After 1533, this would become the greatest problem.

**Cornelis Frederiks and his cloth**

‘Perhaps less quickly than one had hoped, the Government succeeded in finding in master Frederiks a workman who took it upon himself to complete the building in the stead and in the spirit of the previous Architect’, wrote historian Eekhoff. Gabbema claimed that Cornelis Frederiks earned ‘ten stuwers’ a day, ‘without any other profit than an annual cloth tabard with an embroidered lion on the right sleeve and free lodging’. These conditions thus seem similar to the compensation Van Aaken received. Frederiks was allowed to work for three years. He did earn two more stuivers than the eight Aaken received per day. The embroidered lion on Frederiks’s tabard is probably the city symbol of Leeuwarden, surmises Eekhoff. He writes: ‘It was also determined that the Government could make use of his services in other works, as well, if construction on the tower and church was delayed due to the lack of necessary building materials or other obstructions’.

**How the contract with Van Aaken was lost**

A copy of the contract that the city council and Jacob van Aaken both signed may have ended up in the archives of the Tiara family. Pastor Andreas Tiara from Easterein wrote in 1696 that he had seen a document in his father’s house that had
Copy of the contract between both the municipal and the church councils of Leeuwarden and Jacob van Aaken, early seventeenth century.
a remarkable resemblance to the copied text as it is now known. According to Tiara, ‘two, yes three pastors were mentioned by their own name and title. This was a contract between the pastors of St. Vitus and a certain architect for the restoration of the church of St. Vitus, stating that the architect would receive two stuivers a day for his work, a new robe every year and free lodging until the end of the job, because first the church had to be demolished, then rebuilt’.

Stonemasons’ marks on the stairs
The sandstone steps of the spiral staircase in the Oldehove have been marked with signs which at first glance look rather mysterious. They were made by the stonemasons. They were invented in the Middle Ages to preclude discussions about payment. Builders could use them to see exactly how many pieces of stone a stonemason had delivered. Through the centuries, the signs became larger and clearer. Presumably, they did not only serve as a reference of payment, but also as a badge of honour. Like a painter, the stonemason also signed his work. Probably some 34 masons worked on the Oldehove. Their marks reveal that some of them were also active in other cities.

Holes in the stones
If one looks at the Oldehove from the outside, one notices small, 1.5 inches deep holes in the sandstone blocks. They are visible until two-thirds of the way up. There are none in the upper part of the tower. The holes were made at the time so that stones could be hauled up by a scissor-shaped lifting system. The points of the so-called stone scissors were wedged into the holes, after which the workers could pull up the stones. The remarkable thing about these holes is that they hardly occur in the northern and western part of the Netherlands. They are only common in German-speaking areas and the eastern part of the Netherlands. It would appear then that Jacob van Aaken had brought his building techniques from Germany to Leeuwarden. The uppermost part, in which there are no holes, could be from his successor Frederiks, who applied a technique used in the western Netherlands.
Cutout of the oldest map of Leeuwarden and surroundings.

BY JACOB HEERES, CIRCA 1553.
The tower’s failure was painful and final. ‘Some residents did try to support continuation through legacies, but it was in vain’, writes Eekhoff. In his opinion, the Oldehove still earns respect: ‘As the remnant of one of the largest undertakings of its kind in our country, this memorial to antiquity will always deserve the esteem of all who gaze at it’. Leeuwarden apparently not only gave up hope that the tower would be finished but also withdrew the plan for a new church. The old St. Vitus Church, which as ever still stood on the Oldehove Churchyard, was not torn down as intended. The building remained in use, even in its derelict state.

This failure may, of course, have been the main reason to abandon the plan for a new tower and church. However, other issues must have played a role as well. The entire sixteenth century passed turbulently for ecclesiastical Leeuwarden. The city had three different church communities (parishes), of which Nijehove and Hoek were connected to the Cammingha family and Oldehove to the Burmania family. There was heavy competition between these noble families. In the struggle, support for a new church could easily crumble.

There were much bigger problems within the Roman Catholic Church as a whole. Until the beginning of the sixteenth century, it had been the only recognised religious movement in Western Europe, but the German reformer Martin Luther broke this situation open in 1517. His ideas rocked the religious world to its foundations. In the years the Oldehove was built, Protestant ideas also obtained a solid foothold in Friesland. In 1531 a group of Anabaptists was already active in Leeuwarden. It seems the administrators of the church and the city had other things on their minds than construction. In the end, a large majority of the Frisian rulers would choose the side of the reformers. The iconoclasm that raged through the country in 1566 also affected the St Vitus church. Those who wished to rescue statues and other valuables were given the opportunity, but finally ‘eight squads of citizens
and a few workers’ entered the church full of aggression, describes Gabbema. These men ‘used axes, hammers and pickaxes to dent, break, chop and split to pieces and fling around the statues, pictures and altars, with no regard for age, beauty or skill’. Afterwards, the church interior was soberly redesigned, as was proper for a Protestant house of God. However, Protestantism had not yet won decisively. An unpredictable period followed in which it was not clear who would win: the Protestants or the Catholics.

The Roman Catholic Church tried to regain its power. It had already wanted to grant the city a bishop (Remigius Driutius) around 1560, but he never started his work. Regent Margaret of Parma sought a successor in Bishop Cunerus Petri, who established himself with great pomp in Leeuwarden in 1570. He was not popular and aroused a lot of resistance in both the monasteries and the powerful families in Friesland. When Cunerus Petri was accused of excessive feasting and throwing money around, he lost all respect.
He was forced to leave Friesland in 1579 and was never replaced. In 1580, Spanish and Catholic influence in Leeuwarden was over. The population rebelled and drove most of the monks, priests and other clerics out of the city. Leeuwarden was Protestant now and sided with William of Orange, who fought the Spaniards. From now on, Catholics could only practise their faith in concealment. The Protestants removed all Catholic images and ornaments from the churches. They used some of these churches for their own services. Other Catholic buildings were demolished or used as homes and places of work.

It was a miracle that the St. Vitus Church remained standing during these years, because on 23 January 1576 a violent storm caused the ‘Oldehove Church, decayed and weakened and tumbledown with age’ to collapse. The bishop, however, had the building repaired that year. It was, after all, his cathedral. When the Protestants took over power, they also regarded the church as a prominent building. The decay was so severe, however, that it was beyond repair. The city council decided to tear down the house of God, without building a new church to replace it. Eekhoff: ‘With the condition the church was in, the Municipal Government does not appear to have even considered carrying out the earlier plan of erecting a new and large church, which would be attached to the tower and in proportion to the same wide foundation’. The decision to dismantle the St. Vitus Church was made in 1595. Initially, the plan was to raze the whole building. In the end, the city authorities handled it a bit more cautiously. The outermost walls were left standing in 1596. It seems the reason the walls were preserved was because Leeuwarden’s wealthy residents still had themselves buried under the floor of the church. The wall continued to function as a boundary between the expensive and the cheap graves. The immediate vicinity of the old church remained in use as a graveyard for centuries. The Great or Jacobijner Church became Leeuwarden’s main church. The Great Church was originally the church for the Dominican convent. From 1580 it was a church for all the inhabitants of Leeuwarden.

The Oldehove Tower was all that was left. There is hardly anything reminiscent of its initial ecclesiastic function. The name Oldehove,
originally attached to the churchyard and the church, gradually came to be used for the tower. The building underwent a major renovation in these years. Until then, Leeuwarden residents had been able to walk under the tower, as one still can under the Martinitoren (Martini Tower) in Groningen and the Dom (Tower) in Utrecht. Experts did not trust the structural condition of the tower. In 1599, therefore, the city council decided to brick up the entrances of the Oldehove Tower. Only one modest door on the east side remained. It is still there. One can still make out the bricked-up shapes of the entrances on the west and east side. In that same year a wooden framework was placed on top of the tower, similar to the current structure. A weather vane with the city’s coat of arms was put on this.

In the seventeenth century, many changes and renovations were made to the Oldehove. During construction the tower had received
expensive, natural stone enclosures that proved unable to withstand the weather. In 1612 they were restored at great cost. This material kept suffering from the climate, however, and in 1698 it was replaced with an iron fence. In 1617 the tower must have received a clockwork, so that dials could be used to show the time. This was renewed in 1751. Changes were also made to the tower’s surroundings in the seventeenth century. For instance, in 1613 a small building, used as a repository for the human bones that surfaced when old graves were dug up, was placed against the tower. The charnel house was called the ‘benekouw’ in Leeuwarden. Over the centuries it became so full that the bones protruded above the walls. For passers-by it was a macabre, but at the same time exciting, encounter with death.
Sometimes the Oldehove was also used to store corpses. This was done during severe frost, when the ground was too hard to dig. In 1640 and 1684, the tower needed serious repairs. In the latter year namely because the building had been struck by lightning. The Oldehove caught fire, but fortunately it was extinguished in time.

The area between the Oldehove Churchyard and the northern bulwarks was built up halfway through the seventeenth century with houses in which mostly poor people came to live. The Boterhoek was to become one of the best-known working class areas of Leeuwarden. It was common that such neighbourhoods developed on the edges of inner cities, along the outer canal.

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**Drawing of the tower with on the left the charnel house.**

*BY J. STELLINGWERF, 1723.*
The exterior walls of the St. Vitus Church, left standing after the demolition of the church in 1596, were pulled down in 1706. Trees were planted on the contours of the walls, so it remained clear where the church had once stood. Again a circular wall with an entrance gate was built around the churchyard. In 1739 the cap of the tower burnt down, and the upper section had to be radically restored. Instead of the cap, a flat roof was put on. A modest renovation took place in 1768. Twenty years later, the cracks in the tower were becoming so bad that masonry was regularly falling from the top. First they were caught with nets, then the tower was renovated.

The Oldehove probably had a recreational function already at an early stage. Visitors climbed to the top to enjoy the view. The sexton was instructed to admit only ‘respectable’ people. When people climbed the tower, he had to keep an eye on the tower’s strict ban on alcohol and smoking. Anyone who smoked had to pay a fine of 25 caroliguldens. The fine could be even higher for repeat infringements. The sexton had a subordinate ‘watcher’ to assist him. By the end of the eighteenth century, the custodians had great difficulty in enforcing the rules. It was come and go in the tower, especially during the holidays. On these days, the Oldehove was a gathering place for musicians, dancers and drunks. Easter Monday was the most notorious day. This lead to such great irritation that the city council decided to ban violin playing, dancing and the selling of drinks and food on the tower. In 1816, the Oldehove was considerably renovated once again.

The city’s population grew rapidly again in the nineteenth century. This in turn led to a sharp increase in the number of funerals at the Oldehove Churchyard. There was a realisation nationwide that cemeteries within the city could transfer diseases. After a few large cholera epidemics, the government forced all cities and larger villages to build new cemeteries outside the urban areas. In 1833, Leeuwarden put the Algemene Begraafplaats (General Cemetery) on the Spanjaardslaan into use. From that time on, no one was buried at the Oldehove. The 'benekouw' was demolished, and the churchyard became a public park. Around 1900, the area around
The Oldehove Churchyard with people from the neighbourhood in 1903.
the tower was given a park-like appearance with tall trees. There was also room for activities. Fibers were twisted into ropes and cables at the ropewalk in front of the Oldehove.

Fire in the Oldehove
The fact that the leaning tower still stands is partly thanks to the 22-year-old ship’s boy Heerke Louws. On the evening of 20 June 1739, he was visiting a rope-maker in the neighbourhood for a job. Suddenly he noticed flames shooting out of the Oldehove. Heerke alerted the fire brigade. When they arrived, the flames had already reached one of the big bells. The largest one fell with a crash, right through the ceiling. Heerke and a group of soldiers there by coincidence helped get the fire under control. They succeeded. Heerke was rewarded by the city council with twenty dukaten. That was a generous reward in those days. The soldiers were also well paid.

The founder of Heerenveen honored at the Oldehove
The elegant, Namur stone tombstone of Peter van Dekema and Catherine van Loon can be found in the Oldehove’s southern outer wall. The tombstone was discovered around 1860 by workmen making preparations for the construction of a school on the site of the former Oldehove Churchyard. In 1863, the city council decided to immure the tombstone in the tower wall. Van Dekema, who was knighted in 1546, fulfilled important functions during his lifetime, such as councillor at the Court of Friesland and grietman (mayor) of Baarderadeel. He became known later particularly as the founder of the town Heerenveen. Together with two other ‘gentlemen of the veen (peat moor)’, he had vast moorlands reclaimed, after which agriculture and habitation was possible.

The bells of the Oldehove
The Oldehove’s great height made it a perfect bell tower. One or two bells must have been hung quite soon after its construction. In 1540, the prelates announced that they had had a bell cast in Kampen. The bell could be delivered and installed only after financial support from the city council. An interesting question
Drawing of the Oldehove, circa 1700.
Painting of the ropewalk at the Oldehove Churchyard.

BY GBJ WESTERMANN, 1906.
is how the bell ended up in the tower. It could not have been through the door or up the stairs. A hoist outside the tower must have been used, for which big holes in the walls were surely needed. Little is known about the tolling of bells before 1600, but there is more information about the seventeenth century. On 23 November 1633, the Leeuwarden bellfounder Hans Falck cast a big bell that weighed around 3200 kilograms. Afterwards he left for Moscow, where he became Russia’s most important bell and cannon maker. In 1636 his successor, Jacob Noteman, produced for Leeuwarden a smaller one that weighed around 2000 kilograms. The bells were hung at the top of the tower. The casting took place in the former church of Nijehove, just north of the Grote Kerkstraat. Both these bells are still in use. The big bell of the Oldehove is one of the heaviest in Friesland. Inscriptions on the bells reveal how and when they were cast. They also describe their functions. Written in Latin on the big bell is: ‘I announce mournfully the dead, I call joyfully to the living to go to church, for happy events I let my merry triumphant tones be heard’. The small bell has the following inscription: ‘I chime the Folk to their work, I invite the Christians to God’s church, I growl out Joy and Sorrow, Yet I never toll, but am tolled’.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one sexton was responsible for the custodianship of both the Oldehove and the Westerkerk (Western Church) (now Theater Romein). Among other things, he supervised the digging of the graves, the keeping up to date of the burial records, the collecting of the burial funds, and the issuing of the burial notes for both cemeteries. He constantly had to synchronise the Oldehove clockwork with that of the Nieuwetoren (New Tower), built in the centre of town in 1541. It also had to be lubricated. Every morning at four o’clock, with the help of others, he rang the little Oldehove bell for fifteen minutes. This was not done however in the darker months, from 10 October until 17 March. The bells were also used to ‘knell for the dead’. A trained ear could hear whether a man, woman or child was being buried by the way the bell was tolled. During the great plague of 1656 the bells of
Detail of the small bell with the coat of arms of Sybbe Sybbes, mayor around 1636.
The oldest photograph of the Oldehove and the Westerplantage (taken from the Harlingersingel), 1870.
the Oldehove, according to tradition, rang almost incessantly. The bells also sounded on public holidays and feast days, for imminent danger and fires. The tolling of the bells was a particularly heavy task. The large bell had to be set in motion by eight men, while four men were needed for the small one. This changed in 1662. Levers were installed, making it easier. Now only half the manpower was needed.

**Childhood memories of Henry Burger, circa 1870**

‘Sometimes we climbed the Oldehove. We all paid a stuiver to the supervisor, somewhere on the Boterhoek, and were allowed in the tower. We climbed to the first gallery, hung around on the fences a little and then climbed further to the flat roof, where on a clear day one could see Ameland and Schiermonnikoog. We boys didn’t find the view nearly as important as the stairwell, however. One time we went back down to then immediately climb back up the dark, dusty stairs, imagining then that we had been to the Oldehove twice for one stuiver’.

**The great restoration of 1910**

‘The old giant began to look poor and delapidated; his voice became weak, his appearance unhealthy, and his next door neighbours secretly whispered in each other’s ear that several times they had heard the old man groaning at night’, wrote the Leeuwarder Courant about the state of the Oldehove around 1900. ‘Although creaking and far from healthy, it was yet in such a state that rescue and repair was still possible,’ reported architect W.C.A. Hofkamp. He was the director of the public works department in Leeuwarden.

The tower suffered from serious decline. Renovation was badly needed, but the municipality had no money for it. From the turn of the century, the tower had begun to rain masonry that had come loose at its top. There was so much that Hofkamp was forced to fence the area off in order to protect passers-by. The architect decided to investigate what exactly was wrong: ‘I had some cracks
in several places bricked up and painted over in order to be able to immediately ascertain and measure the reopening’. Hofkamp discovered that the southeastern and northwestern halves of the tower were rubbing against each other on the inside, repeatedly causing cracks. 'It was especially worse when the bells were rung'. At his request, the mayor and aldermen decided to no longer ring the bells after 1902. Hofkamp submitted a restoration plan to the city council. The council approved it and requested a subsidy from the government.

In those years the government was very concerned about the preservation of historic monuments, and it showed itself generous. It offered to take on half of the cost of the restoration in Leeuwarden. Initially the grant was allowed to run up to 12,500 guilders, and afterwards it was even increased to 15,000 guilders. Hofkamp later wrote: ‘But the granting of such large sums by Government and Municipality did not remain without criticism. There were still many, also here in the city, who considered the Oldehove to be a big lump of stones, a worthless, failed product and thought it was a shame to spend so much money on it, and very naturally many were sympathetic to these sourpusses’. According to Hofkamp, the lack of ringing bells had nevertheless convinced many opponents of the necessity of the tower’s restoration: ‘A Frisian simply loves ringing bells, and because those of the Oldehove are the largest in all of Friesland, they especially are held in high esteem’.

The famous architect Pierre Cuypers would supervise the overhaul on behalf of the government. He was held in high regard, thanks to his designs for such famous buildings as the Central Station and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Cuypers was no stranger to Leeuwarden, because the Sint-Bonifatiuskerk (St. Boniface Church), completed in 1884, was also by him. He designed a great number of places of worship in his lifetime and had extensive experience with church restorations. For inspiration, Cuypers took Hofkamp to the tower of Oirschot, which was 60 metres high and had partly collapsed. The restoration of this building gave Hofkamp new ideas. He decided to use steel anchors to reinforce the tower, as had been done in Oirschot.
Hofkamp had 27 large anchors installed in the walls. He wanted to inject the cracks full of mortar. Furthermore, most of the beams and the masonry had to be renewed. Structural engineering was developing rapidly at that time. Hofkamp considered a wooden belfry old-fashioned. He decided to build a new one of stronger and lighter steel. The metal had by now become very affordable. Hofkamp got his materials from everywhere. From Amsterdam he obtained new works for the clock. A company from Midwolda helped rehang the bells. Hofkamp went to Apeldoorn for the steel anchors. The belfry was made in Rotterdam. Hofkamp had wanted his bricks to be fired by Frisian brickmakers, but they had no suitable samples. So Hofkamp turned to Leiderdorp, Lobith and Tegelen for this. He implemented many other small adjustments to the tower. He had the clock dials on the tower replaced by four new, copper ones. The year 1910 is still legible on one of these plates.

All the work materials were sold at the end of the job. The profits were put into the completion of the final activities. Supervisor Cuypers no longer visited the site as often, due to his age. Sometimes he sent his son Joseph, who had also already acquired renown with buildings like the stock exchange in Amsterdam. When the tower was finished, to Hofkamp’s amazement the elder Cuypers appeared once again in Leeuwarden. ‘The old man, by then almost 84 years of age, climbed up and down the tower with youthful vigor, without any difficulty, and took everything in with such zeal and so accurately, as many a young person would have been hard put to do’. The architect found the restoration so interesting that he asked Hofkamp to put his report down on paper. Hofkamp did so in 1911. So came about one of the very few books devoted to the monument: *The Tower ‘De Oldehove’ in Leeuwarden and its History*. The Leeuwarder Courant was jubilant about the restoration in its annual review of 1910. The bells rang again, to the delight of the editors-in-chief: ‘Oldest citizen, faithful sentinel, bold Oldehove, let us yet long hear your bronze voice!’.
Structural engineering drawing for the restoration, 1910.
Restoration work with a pressure pump for mortar, 1910.
The Oldehove had been a landmark since the sixteenth century. The promising young writer Jacob van Lennep, who in 1823 toured a considerable part of the Netherlands, found the Oldehove a ‘remarkable structure’. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a substantial number of tourists came especially to visit the Oldehove. In 1912, for example, 1473 people bought a ticket for the climb. It would be much busier however if it had an elevator, thought the Leeuwarden wine merchant Henry Gorter.

In 1909, Gorter submitted a request to the municipality to be allowed to install such an elevator, but he got no support for it. He tried again in 1913, this time with success. From 1914 he began to collect money for the new installation. The elevator would cost 5000 guilders. Together with a few people from Leeuwarden, he set up a Public Limited Company ‘Maatschappij Oldehove’, which would be in charge of exploitation of the tower and the elevator. Although Gorter was the initiator, he soon pulled out because he was too busy. Butter exporter Roelof Buisman and dairy bank president Reinder Kuperus joined ‘management’. Their companies offered to become sponsors. The cooperative dairy bank in particular was to become an important pillar of support for the Public Limited Company. From now on, the organisation held its board meetings at the headquarters of this bank, the predecessor of the current Friesland Bank.

The city council agreed to the elevator, provided that there were never more than one hundred people allowed in the tower. The mayor, aldermen and officials were entitled to free access to the elevator. The Public Limited Company would have liked to hang the elevator in the top of the tower, but this turned out to be unfeasible without severely damaging the tower. Therefore a maximum height of 26 metres was chosen for the elevator. Visitors would then still have to climb the upper 13 metres via the spiral staircase. World War I made it difficult to get hold of the required electrical installations, and work was delayed. The renovation was finally completed in the summer of 1916. In September, the promoters put the elevator into use. In 40 seconds
Toren „de Oldehove”
Leeuwarden

Electrische Lift-installatie
Schitterend vergezicht - Verrassend panorama
Aanwijzing omliggende plaatsen

Gedurende de maanden April tot en met October is de toren alle dagen geopend van 10-12 en van 1-6 uur.
Toegangskaarten verkrijgbaar bij den Torenwachter.

Voor opstijgingen met de lift worden
4 kaarten à 10 cts. vereischt.
it whooshed to the floor where the bells hang. After this 44 steps still had to be climbed to reach the roof.

The number of visitors quickly increased tenfold. In 1917 there were 11,876 tickets sold in the Oldehove. A year later it was 14,198 and in 1921 even 17,846. To please the tourists even more, the Public Limited Company set up ‘enormous binoculars’. They also mounted on the edge the names of the eighty villages and towns visible from the tower with the naked eye. Custodianship of the tower was awarded to tower guard J. Veelders. He opened the building daily from Good Friday until November. Visitors were welcome in the colder months as well, but then only on Sundays and public holidays. In the twenties and thirties, the annual number of visitors gradually dropped back down to under 9,000. The busiest period was usually in April and May. At Whitsuntide in 1932, for instance, there were over 1,600 visitors.
In the year 1933, the tower’s surroundings changed dramatically. The walking garden and the last visible remains of the cemetery were removed. The top layer of the churchyard was excavated, whereby thousands of bones emerged. These were given a new resting place in the Algemene Begraafplaats (General Cemetery) on the Spanjaardslaan. The Oldehove Churchyard turned into a busy city square, used from now on as an assembly point for freight transportation and package deliverers. In the year 1933, the Roman Catholic Church proposed to the municipality the building of a new place of worship at the edge of the square. If the Catholics’ plan had succeeded, the Oldehove would in the end have gotten, exactly four hundred years after its construction, the church that originally belonged to it, even if it was built at some distance. The city council, however, was not charmed by the idea. The Catholics therefore tried for a different location, on the Harlingerstraatweg. Here rose the present-day Sint-Dominicuskerk (St. Dominicus Church).

During World War II, German occupiers used the Oldehove as a watchtower. Soldiers peered at allied planes from the top of the tower and passed information on to the airport. Tradition has it that the soldiers on duty there enjoyed themselves immensely. They sunbathed and often lazed about, because no one could see them up there. It is said they even had a little bell connected to the entrance below. When someone rang the doorbell, the soldiers above had plenty of time to get cleaned up and give an impression of alertness to officers and other visitors. Soldiers were by the way prohibited from the Torenstraat (Tower Street) next to the Oldehove, because it was part of the area where prostitutes worked.

The large number of bronze bells in the Frisian towers aroused the Germans’ interest. They were in great need of metal for weaponry and ammunition, and from 1943 on they demanded the church bells be surrendered. Historic monument protectors managed to stipulate that the oldests bells be allowed to remain hanging and painted a white letter M on them. This is most likely how the bell De Leeuw (The Lion) was rescued. Some sources say it is also how the seventeenth-century bells at the top were rescued. Officials recounted after the war, however, that the Germans had actually
requisitioned these bells. Apparently the city council replied to this order that it would be impossible to get them out through the doors and windows. The Germans answered that holes would just have to be made in the tower. The municipal response was that this would only cause the tower to collapse, whereby it could no longer be used as an observation post. This is supposed to have finally convinced the Germans to leave the bells hanging.

Before the liberation, the Oldehove bells tolled a ‘great alarm’ for several minutes. It was a warning to everyone from Leeuwarden to find a safe place. The liberators were coming, and the city found itself on the frontline of the war. Leeuwarden was lucky. The liberation of the Frisian capital passed with relatively little violence. Other towns suffered far more. When Leeuwarden was liberated, a number of collaborators were hauled to the Oldehove. Their task was to ring the bells for hours, as a sign of rejoicing.
The clock at the bottom of the tower

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Oldehove has had a third bell. Upon entering the tower one sees a remarkably large example hanging against the back wall. This is De Leeuw (The Lion), probably the oldest bell in the city. The bronze colossus, weighing about 3000 kg, was cast in 1541 for the Nieuwetoren (New Tower) on the Grote Hoogstraat. When this structure was demolished in 1884, the municipality initially put De Leeuw in storage. Presumably, construction workers in 1915 made a large hole in the western facade of the Oldehove through which they pulled the bell inside. The colossus has the following inscription in Latin: ‘Rightfully I am called the Lion, who with a roar counts out the hours over the rooftops of Leeuwarden. My sound calls the citizens from all sides to the fire and to arms. Cornelis Waghenens cast me in 1541’.

The tombstone in the tower

At the bottom of the Oldehove lies the gravestone of Tiete van Cammingha and his wife Trijn van Hottinga. The tombstone was found in 1933, during the clearing of the Oldehove Churchyard. Because of the striking and aristocratic ornamentation, the municipality decided to rescue the stone and transfer it to the tower. Tiete’s year of birth is unclear, but he married Trijn in 1542. Ten years later, in 1552, he died. She died in 1572. Tiete was a son of the famous nobleman Wytze van Cammingha and belonged to one of the richest and most powerful Frisian families of his time. There is nothing particularly remarkable known about Tiete’s life, but there is about his children. In particular Tiete’s son, also named Tiete, made a name for himself as captain in the Spanish army.
The Oldehove from 1945 to 2011

The Frisians longed for fun and relaxation after the war. There was hardly any money for travelling, so people went en masse to attractions in their own surroundings, such as the Oldehove. In the first three years after the liberation, over 53,000 people visited the tower. In the fourth year (1948), according to newspaper articles, 12,000 visitors turned up. Whoever wanted to climb the tower had to buy a ticket from the tower guards, husband and wife Antonius Franciscus Visser and Boudina Visser-Vallinga. They lived in a little house on the Boterhoek. On 1 April 1931 the couple took over custodianship from the old guard Veelders. ‘During the Great Depression we were looking for another house, ‘ Mrs. Visser recounted later. ‘My husband found out that we could get this house. The position of tower guard went with it’. The lives of the Visser couple became entwined with the tower. Neither had a fear of heights. When the season began again around Good Friday, they scrubbed the tower completely clean. They even washed the outside of the windows. The custodians earned part of their income by selling all sorts of souvenirs, for example, little flags, spoons and postcards. They were for sale at the entrance on the ground floor.

After a few peak years, the number of visitors stabilised in the early fifties at an average of 11,000 per year. Most tourists paid a short visit. They climbed the tower, looked around for several minutes and then left again. Mrs. Visser enjoyed the work and the view: ‘With a northeastern wind it looks as if (the island) Ameland is being lifted out of the water’. In 1953, the touristic value of the Oldehove took a severe blow. The elevator, which had made the climb possible for almost everyone, broke down and proved to be beyond repair. P.L.C. Maatschappij Oldehove calculated that the purchase of a new elevator would cost 90,000 guilders. This was too expensive, and the elevator was not replaced. So after 37 years, visitors once again had to rely on their own two feet. The signs informing tourists of the surrounding towns and villages disappeared from the tower as well, in the early sixites. Still, a large number of tourists kept coming. Most visitors were Frisians, but Scandinavians and Germans showed up at the door
as well, reported Mrs. Visser in 1961. She constantly had to keep an eye on the mischievous youth: ‘Despite the fact that the bells of the Oldehove have been put out of operation, they climb into the belfry and start up the bells’. Children also often drew nude figures and less-than-decent texts in the guestbook.

The arrival of the Provincial Library (now Tresoar) put an end to the opening of the Oldehove to the public in the early sixties. The Visser couple’s house stood on the spot where the library was to be built. As of 1 April 1964, their lease was terminated. They moved to the
Visitors on top of the Oldehove, 1958.

PHOTO: SJOERD ANDRINGA.
The Oldehove Churchyard as an assembly point for freight services, late sixties.
outskirts of town and were unwilling to continue custodianship of the tower from there. Since the P.L.C. Maatschappij Oldehove could not find any successors, the Oldehove was closed to visitors. In 1968 and ‘69 the Oldehove Churchyard was the subject of a large-scale archaeological excavation. Under the direction of Herre Halbertsma, the remains of the old St. Vitus Church were unearthed. Afterwards, the square was redesigned as a parking lot.

The condition of the leaning tower rapidly deteriorated during these years. Already when the Visser couple still worked there, crumbled-off masonry debris was being found regularly in the tower. Even plant enthusiasts were amazed. All sorts of rare little plants and trees grew in and on the tower. Most likely as a result of bird droppings, seeds had been able to germinate here. Biologists no doubt found this interesting, but it certainly was not a sign of good maintenance. As the sixties went on, problems became even more serious. The outside masonry came loose. In November 1966 the tower got nationwide attention when falling chunks of masonry caused considerable dents in the roofs of parked cars. Fortunately no people were hit, but fences were put up around the tower. For safety considerations, the bells were no longer tolled.

The municipality began to look for building materials to repair the tower. They collected, among other things, kloostermoppen (large bricks used in medieval cloisters) (for example, from the De Nieuwe Doelen Hotel) and had local architect Andre Baard draw up a restoration plan. It seemed nothing was likely to come of this expensive project until, in 1972, the government in The Hague unexpectedly agreed to the use of the unemployed. In the autumn the municipality made preparations with lightening speed, because the government wanted the work started and finished in the year 1973. This meant renovation had to begin in the winter. A unique plan was devised for this. The tower was completely scaffolded, and the top was wrapped up. Indoor heating was put in, so the workmen would be protected from the fierce winter cold and wind. From January on, the restorers rapidly repaired the masonry. An outside elevator was installed to transport goods and workers.
Restoration work at night, 1973.

PHOTO: LEEUWARDER COURANT.
The bricked up masonry of 1910 and 1911 appeared not to have adhered to the old, remaining masonry, on the one hand due to the use of a type of brick that was too hard, and on the other due to the use of cement mortar, the cure-all of the time, wrote the municipal project manager Visser later in his report. This was now quickly repaired. The old elevator from 1916, which had not been used since the fifties, was removed. In November a new beacon was hoisted onto the tower. Despite all the haste, the work was not entirely completed in 1973. Fortunately, the government proved flexible and granted an extension so that the year 1974 could be used, as well. The job was completed in November. A total of 2,800,000 guilders was spent. Mayor Johannes Brandsma was so proud that he sent a New Year’s card with a picture of the restored Oldehove on it to all the municipality’s contacts. More good news came in 1975. After ten years, the tower was once again made open to the public, under the responsibility of the VVV tourist office. There was also once again a tower guard: Pieter Kuipers.

The doors opened on April 30, following an old tradition. Adults could go upstairs for a guilder, children for two quarters. There was a lot of enthusiasm. On the first day there were 780 visitors. By the end of July, 9000 visitors had already been counted. A wide variety of nationalities crossed Kuipers’s floor. Most foreign visitors took off their hats upon entry. One Japanese family had even knelt in prayer in front of the tower before they went in, the astonished tower guard told the Leeuwarder Courant. Tourists questioned Kuipers endlessly: where could they find lapwings’ eggs, where could wild flowers in bloom be seen.

In 1977, the municipality decided to limit access to the tower for young people and unaccompanied children. That summer, a few adolescent boys had balanced on the edge of the tower every day. They were caught in the act by the staff of the insurance group AGO, who could see them from their window. At least as annoying were the children hanging from the rods of the clockwork. The time display was completely disrupted for a long while, and all the clock dials showed different times. There was also good news. In the same year, coin-operated binoculars were mounted on top of the tower again. The many Frisian emigrants from Canada and the U.S. who visited the Frisian capital were very enthusiastic about this.
The Oldehove Churchyard was redesigned in 1977. The contours of the demolished St. Vitus Church, indicated by colored stones in the pavement, were replaced by small, low walls. The tree next to the Oldehove was capped in October. Some found that a shame, because it had been visible on many historic postcards. It was replaced by new greenery, but this was short-lived. After a few years, the low walls and vegetation would make way for a flat, expansive area that offered more parking space. The number of visitors remained high. In some years, like 1980 and 1983, there was even a ‘ten thousandth visitor’. He or she received a gift from the VVV tourist office.

In the fall of 1980, the leaning tower was occupied for three hours by Onkruit, an organisation opposed to conscription. The club used the occupation to protest the imprisonment of conscientious objectors. The tower guard was lured outside by the activists, and three boys who happened to be in the tower were chased away. The tower was repeatedly ‘abused’ for demonstrations in those days.

In November 1993 there were alarming reports about the Oldehove. People living in the neighbourhood saw how small chunks of the tower fell to the ground. The municipality acted quickly and prohibited the tolling of the large bell. In addition, the northern and western sides were partly wrapped up with safety nets. Just in that period, politicians were very concerned about the image of the city. The people of Leeuwarden had to radiate the ‘Oldehove feeling’. Which obviously did not mean falling bricks. It got worse. In March 1994, fist-sized chunks of brick fell from the tower, tearing the safety nets. Alderman Ap Timmermans was worried: ‘People are not allowed to get hurt’. An organisation was hastily set up to investigate the situation and determine if restoration was possible. Another large brick fell, causing a dent in the pavement. The problems were a result of errors made during the restoration of 1973, revealed an architectural survey. The warmth in the tower had dried the mortar too quickly and it had become porous. As a result, moisture had been able to penetrate deep into the walls since the seventies. In addition, it appeared poor quality bricks had been used in 1973. There was nothing to do but, once more, thoroughly restore the Oldehove.
So it was apparent yet again that the maintenance of such an old tower is no simple task. The restorers of 1973 had pointed out the mistakes of 1910. In turn, the structural engineers of 1994 pointed out the imperfections of 1973. Actions were begun throughout the entire city. Piet Kramer from Leeuwarden had miniature ceramic towers made, the revenues of which he donated to the tower. Artists started various collections which soon yielded a little under 25,000 guilders. With this civilian initiative, the Stichting Restauratie (Restoration Foundation) Oldehove was able to raise around 800,000 guilders. Which was necessary, too, because the estimated cost rose to 1.8 million guilders. In June 1997, clockmaker Tjitte Talsma and four scaffolders tolled the bells of the Oldehove for five minutes,
announcing the restoration. That was ‘a heavy job,’ according to Talsma. In the following months the tower was completely scaffolded. Hundreds of new bricks would be fitted into the masonry. The work progressed rapidly, and in the succeeding months the tower gradually came out of the scaffolding. The building had a remarkably fresh red color, thanks to the new bricks. Restorer Wim Barneveld warned that the color would soon fade, however, due to the weather. In the summer of 1998, the tower was once more in full use. Tourists climbed the restored Oldehove again. A proper team of volunteer tower guards was put together.

In 2000, the tower was incorporated into the art project ‘Leeuwarden in Perspective’. The artists Ramon van de Werken, Pierre Mansire and Frank Zeilstra designed dozens of stained glass windows for the Oldehove’s small window openings. Van de Werken drew the little windows for the ground floor, on which a bottle of Friesche Vlag coffee milk, a lapwing and a hare can be seen. Mansire and Zeilstra chose geometric shapes for higher up in the tower.

The refurbishment was now complete, but the square still needed a lot of work. The city council decided in 2003 to build a parking garage underneath it. From 2005 the soil was excavated for two years to a depth of 8 metres, after which two parking levels were built in it. On its completion in 2006 the garage had over 400 parking places. The roof was designated as an events square. The contours of the old church have been returned to the square with the help of tombstones and fountains. Because of the mound’s great historical value, the municipality first commissioned an extensive archaeological survey. Archaeologists from the ADC Archeoprojecten (Archaeological Service Centre) and the University of Groningen exposed the location’s entire history of habitation. They discovered the remains of several farms from the Roman period. Never before had such impressive remnants of habitation from that period been found in Leeuwarden’s city centre. This reinforced the monument status of the Oldehove Churchyard.

A century after Gorter launched his first plans for an elevator, history began to repeat itself. In 2005, the Rotary Club Leeuwarden Oldehove presented plans to transform the tower into a modern attraction. An
important component of these ideas was the return of the elevator. It would improve access to the first floor, making ceremonies like marriages possible. Consultation with the older Stichting Restauratie Oldehove (Oldehove Restoration Foundation) led to a new organisation. This Stichting Vrienden van de Oldehove (Friends of the Oldehove Foundation) would coordinate the plans. The city council had faith in the innovations. Fundraising by the foundation was successful. The Friesland Bank donated the elevator, while the city made €450,000 available in 2008. With this, the major refurbishment could start in 2010.

Architectural firm OVT in Groningen drew up a plan to make the tower more attractive in all respects. Together with the multimedia spectacle by the Tinker bureau in Utrecht, this would considerably
increase the number of visitors. In 2010, the number of visitors already doubled to just under 12,000. To improve the view from the top, a glass ‘crow’s nest’ was placed on the tower’s eastern edge. This offers a view of the Oldehove Churchyard and the eastern city centre. Panels with explanations of the view appeared on each side. Furthermore, a new terrace floor was laid on the roof. On the ground floor a new entrance was set up, with a considerably more attractive appearance than the former, cluttered layout. The clockwork on the first floor was made more visible via a glass casing. Window film with historical images on it was glued to the second floor windows. Exploitation of the Oldehove passed from the VVV tourist office to the Historisch Centrum Leeuwarden (Historical Centre of Leeuwarden) as of 2010. This organisation had earlier reached thousands of school children with the educational project ‘Ondersteboven van de Oldehove’ (Turned Topsy-Turvey by the Oldehove).

‘Everyone knows the Leaning Tower of Pisa, but have you ever heard of the Leaning Tower of Leeuwarden? When the villages Oldehove, Nijehove and Hoek were consolidated in 1435 and formed the city Leeuwarden, people wanted a new church. Architect Jacob van Aaken was used to solid building ground, not to soft clay. This is why he designed an extra robust tower. This, however, made the structure very heavy. The tower was not even ten metres high when it began to sink. A solution was devised: the brick masons had to keep building it upright. This did nothing for the tower’s appearance. Now not only did it lean, it was curved, too! It made the people of Leeuwarden despondent and after a few years construction was stopped. In 1576 the whole thing collapsed after a storm. The end of the tower? No, not yet. In 1997, restoration of the tower was begun. This was also a big hassle, but after a couple of years it was finally finished. Nowadays, everyone can enjoy this leaning, curving building. It is beautifully ugly!’

(Handy in the rain!) The Oldehove in Donald Duck, 2010.
Trapped in the Oldehove

In the eighties, the tower occasionally made it into the newspaper because tourists had been locked in. The tower guards closed the tower between twelve and one o’clock so they could eat a hot meal at home. Tourists who were not downstairs in time were locked in, to their irritation. They had to wait until the custodian came back from lunch. In 1987, four tourists were locked in together with the tower guard. An annoying feature of the tower was that the door could only be opened from the outside. Firemen freed the five people.

The Oldehove upright once more

Engineering progressed so quickly after the war, that engineers ventured to invent tricks to put leaning towers upright again. In 1955, F. Zoortsma from Ezumazijl contended in the Leeuwarder Courant that he could even set the Oldehove straight again. The newspaper found it ‘a bold claim’, but allowed Zoortsma to elaborate. ‘As long as the foundation is original, it would be no problem’, Zoortsma stated. Klaas Boorsma, an engineer from Drachten, predicted repeatedly in the Leeuwarder Courant: ‘The time will come when the Oldehove will topple’. Boorsma was definitely an expert. He had been involved in several major construction jobs in the city. According to him, it was inevitable that the ‘tipping safety’ would disappear someday. ‘Anyone with a little common sense can see that at some point it will go wrong’, he informed the Leeuwarder Courant in 1995. Putting it upright – even if only slightly – was certainly feasible in his opinion. He also advised a new foundation with concrete piles. He himself avoided the area around the leaning tower.

Height and skew

- The tower leans 1.99 metres to the northwest.
- The Oldehove is 39 metres high. If the wooden construction is included, the height is almost 48 metres.
- One stands 72.5 cm higher outside and in front of the entrance than at the back against the western facade.
- The staircase of the Oldehove has 183 steps. The steps higher up in the tower are steeper than those lower down.
The frustration and humiliation of the failed Oldehove were deeply buried in the soul of the people of Leeuwarden. The completion of the Martini Tower in Groningen around 1547 probably caused extra pain in Leeuwarden. While those in Leeuwarden were building their tower, those in Groningen were also hard at work. They had already built a Martini Tower twice, but both were destroyed by lightning and fire in the fifteenth century. Fourteen years after Leeuwarden had stopped building, Groningen succeeded in completing its Martini Tower. At the time, it must have been over 100 metres high. Again, fate struck. A bonfire set the top of the tower ablaze in 1577. After repairs in 1622, the Martini Tower got its current height of 97 metres.

Leeuwarden either had no money or no need to build such a high tower again. There were, however, still some pennies left over for a lower one, which could save the city’s honour at least a little. This became the ‘Nieuwetoren’ (New Tower). For this, the municipality once again chose a higher location as a building site. The Nieuwetoren must have been finished around 1541 on the southern Nijehove mound. Today, this place is called Klokplein and is located in the middle of the Grote Hoogstraat. The Nieuwetoren was 43 metres high. That was not much taller than the Oldehove, but the new building did truly look like a tower, with a wooden spire. The Nieuwetoren would remain the pride of the city for years, but ultimately it started to lean, too. This did not happen during construction but was a gradual process occurring over centuries. In the 1930s, the building got a major overhaul but continued to lean. Oddly enough, the tower sagged with a curve, just like the Oldehove. The spire remained upright, but underneath it a strange eastward hump appeared. In 1883, the building was struck by a violent storm. The tower was so heavily damaged that there was danger for the surroundings. The municipality saw no other solution but to tear it down. This took place in 1884. So in the end the Oldehove outlived its successor. The Nieuwetoren disappeared, while the old one remained.

Throughout the centuries Leeuwarden got several additional towers, but not one was as imposing as the structure Van Aaken had wanted.
to build. Only when the Roman Catholic Church got permission to build big churches again, did a new opportunity present itself. In 1882, construction on the Sint-Bonifatiuskerk (St. Boniface Church) began on the northeast side of the city centre. The design was by the afore-mentioned Pierre Cuypers, who had the Rijksmuseum and many graceful Catholic churches across the country to his name. His Bonifatius tower was over 78 metres high. The construction had a symbolic significance for Leeuwarden, especially since it was in this period that the Nieuwetoren was torn down. For the first time in history, the Frisian capital had a finished church tower with real significance. No matter how high the Bonifatius Tower was, however, after more than four centuries Leeuwarden had still not topped the Groningen Martini Tower. The rivalry with the largest city in the northern Netherlands began to intensify at the end of the twentieth century. During that period, cities throughout the whole country began to distinguish themselves more clearly.

The architect Abe Bonnema from Leeuwarden had dreamt his whole life of giving his city a real skyline. Together with his colleague Jan van der Leij, he designed at the end of the twentieth century a tower over 114 metres high for the Achmea insurance company. Bonnema died before his tower was finished, just like Van Aaken had. While the architect of the Oldehove suffered from his failure, the architect of the Achmea Tower could look back on his achievements with satisfaction. He had fulfilled his promise. Leeuwarden now had a skyline, one that included the tallest tower in the north. Although the Achmea Tower was initially controversial, over the years many people in Leeuwarden have come to love it anyway, just as they did the Oldehove. In promotional leaflets, both towers are now often depicted in brotherly fashion next to each other as an icon of a modern city in which history still lives.

The Oldehove leans, but it could be much worse. The most lopsided tower in the Netherlands is probably the little church tower of Miedum, coincidentally also in the municipality of Leeuwarden. Another tower that really leans is in Bedum, Groningen. Anyone who wants to see the most lopsided tower in Europe should go to Suurhusen. This building is also in the terpengebied (mound region), namely in German Ost-Friesland, near Emden.
The skyline of Leeuwarden from the south in the 18th century, with the Nieuwetoren in the middle.
Myths, literature, songs, sayings, advertising and art

‘It is remarkable how this eternally unfinished tower, that has been missing a church for three and a half centuries now, has had such a great influence on the popular imagination,’ wrote former municipal archivist H.M. Mensonides in 1957. ‘Not only is it the symbol of Leeuwarden and is it surrounded by various legends, it also has an important place in Frisian parlance’. The tower has indeed been a great source of inspiration for stories and myths. In addition, there are many sayings and expressions dedicated to it, both in Frisian and in Liwwardders (Leeuwarden dialect).

_In stimme as de Aldehou_ - A voice as loud as the Oldehove.

_Sa bryk as de Aldehou_ - As lopsided as the Oldehove.

_Hy is sa dronken dat er de Aldehou oansjocht foar in piipûtpluzer_ - He is so drunk, he thinks the Oldehove is a pipecleaner.

_Hy moat muoike/omke sizze tsjin de Aldehou_ - He has to say aunt/uncle to the Oldehove (he was truly born and bred in Leeuwarden).

_A’k de Oldehove niet siën ken, dan foël ik my onwennich_ - When I can’t see the Oldehove, I’m uneasy.

_Hy is trou met ‘e Oldehove_ - He is married to the Oldehove (he is a real native of Leeuwarden).

_De Oldehove is de oudste weesjongen van Leeuwarden_ - The Oldehove is the oldest orphan in Leeuwarden (because it lacks a church).

_The Oldehove on a floating cabbage leaf:_ A little old woman sat on top of a tower, spinning wool. This tower was floating over the Frisian Middle Sea on a cabbage leaf. When it reached the shore, the woman fell backwards. She cried: ‘Ho, _alde_ (oldie), ho’. This is how the Oldehove got its name. The tower floated no farther and remained forever at its present location. There is a similar story in which the
little old woman is sitting on the coast when the tower floats towards her. Suddenly the shadow of the Oldehove falls across her spinning wheel. Then the woman cries, ‘Ho, Alde, ho.’

**Two quarrelling giants:** Another story often told is about two giants who got into an argument. One sat on the Oldehove, the other on the Dom in Utrecht. They shot at each other with bows and arrows. The arrows were blown adrift by strong winds. One of them landed at the site of a farm near the village of Hempens in Leeuwarden, which has been called Pylkwier (arrow mound) ever since.

**Van Aaken’s beautiful daughter:** There are various stories about the architect Jacob van Aaken’s beautiful daughter, who it was said could make men lose their heads. It is unknown whether Van Aaken actually had children. According to writer J.P. Wiersma, the story goes something like this: When Leeuwarden wanted to build a new tower, the city fathers consulted a fortune teller. She advised them to have the four cornerstones of the building laid by four righteous and honest men. There was some doubt about the fourth candidate. Still this Sippo Noarmans was allowed to lay one of the cornerstones. Soon enough Noarmans could no longer keep his eyes off the architect’s beautiful daughter. When he approached her one fateful day, she rejected him for the umpteenth time. He would not put up with this. Noarmans attacked the girl with his dagger. She screamed so loudly that her father heard and ran into the house. When Van Aaken saw what was happening, he hit Noarmans so hard with a heavy hammer that he dropped dead. The court subsequently condemned Van Aaken to be hanged. Just before he was executed, the Oldehove appeared to have sunk in the direction of the stone that Noarmans had laid. This was a clear sign that he could not have been a righteous man.

**The Oldehove as a lighthouse:** Some of the false stories about the Oldehove have been stubbornly retold for many centuries. Even now, many people from Leeuwarden still believe them. The toughest misconception is that the tower was originally built as a lighthouse. Some claim that the Oldehove had had this function to help ships navigate and to prevent them from stranding on the coast. The building does after all stand on the edge of the former Middle Sea.
However, when the Oldehove Tower was built in 1529, the Middle Sea had unquestionably, for at least two hundred years already, been drained so far inland that a lighthouse in Leeuwarden would have had no purpose.

**Cowhide as a foundation:** There is an old misunderstanding about the lopsidedness. Supposedly the builders had founded the building on ox hides, which then led to the sinking. This fabrication, that was believed for a long time, was refuted around 1911 when restorer Hofkamp discovered that the tower was founded on cement and clay.

**The Druid School:** In the eighteenth century, it was claimed that a pagan school for witches and druids, Aula Dei (God’s Hall), originally stood on the site of the Oldehove. It is certainly true that the inhabitants of the mound originally worshiped nature gods. There is, however, no archaeological indication that a pagan temple or anything similar ever stood on the Oldehove’s location.

**The cracking of the large bell:** According to an old myth, the Oldehove’s oldest bell cracked in 1616. This occurred during the hour-long funereal tolling for the death of Mr. Ivo, the last pastor of the St. Vitus Church. He was one of the few Catholic clergymen allowed to continue living in Leeuwarden after the Spaniards were driven out in 1580. The people of Leeuwarden had great respect for this elderly man. Because he was already so old by then, it is unlikely he died 36 years later, as the myth relates.

**The Oldehove as a late Gothic praaltoren (ornamental tower):** Another story comes from the Leeuwarden artist Otto Stoelinga, who concluded that the Leeuwarden tower was modelled on the Münster Church of Freiburg in southern Germany. This richly decorated Gothic church tower was famous throughout Europe. In Stoelinga’s opinion the Oldehove shows many similarities to the building in Freiburg. The artist made an illustration based on this assumption and also built a miniature version of the Oldehove in finished form. He had in mind an ornamental tower 105 metres high with a church attached to it that was 35 metres high. Stoelinga’s vision has gotten little support from architectural historians.
A well-known Frisian rhyme:
De Aldehou is in grut gebou, jou my in stoer, dan spring ik der oer – The Oldehove is a large building, give me a penny, and I’ll jump over it.

A popular song (especially with fans of Cambuur, Leeuwarden’s football team), recorded in urban dialect, is ‘Oh Oldehove’ by Johnny, Johanna & Sjoukje, with the refrain:
Oh Oldehove, kien wat staast weer skeef
a’k dij passeard ben bin ’k bliid dat ik noch leef.
Ik denk su gau ‘es as ik langs dy kom
noch één su’n beste wyn flaach dan gaat ut soadsje om

Oh Oldehove, my child so lopsided you are
when I pass by you I’m glad I’m still alive.
I often think when I pass by you
one more good gust of wind and the whole heap will fall over.

Excerpt from ‘The revenge of the Oldehove’ by Simon Vestdijk:
‘The tower has heard.
That his death knell is being tolled:
Defeated, he stands dreaming
About this never expected decision.’

‘He has heard the rumor
Down in the council building:
Bespectacled surveyors come
To nail him down with plank and rope.’

‘My lopsidedness is surely no flaw?
It is a mania to foolishly play
With gravity, and to scatter
My specifications far and wide over the square!’

I am still the weather-beaten and silent
Jewel of monastic orders!
Shall anyone subjugate me?
Shall I become pavement?’ ---

(....)
The Oldehove has been a great source of inspiration for the population and entrepreneurs of Leeuwarden for centuries. The tower has often been reproduced, in paintings and models, written about and used as a namesake. A great many clubs, companies and products have used the name ‘Oldehove’ throughout the ages. As a name, the Oldehove is linked to several sports. The Damclub De Oldehove (checkers club), founded in 1964, is the most well-known example. The Oldehovepartij, an annual kaatsen (Frisian handball) match held in Leeuwarden and organised by the Leewarder Kaats Club (LKC Sonnenborgh), is famous as well.

In the twentieth century, several people in Leeuwarden decided to build a model of the leaning tower to scale. The afore-mentioned Otto Stoelinga fabricated a beautiful wooden Oldehove. Detachable sections explain clearly what the tower could have been if construction had not been halted. Dirk Jager made a miniature Oldehove out of little homemade bricks and super glue. The Historisch
Centrum Leeuwarden also has a silver Oldehove, formerly presented as a trophy at the Stinstournooi (football tournament). One can find here as well a brick Oldehove from the Leeuwarden steam tobacco factory (Taconis), which was also once called De Oldehove. It advertised with the slogan: Oldehove tobacco, a pleasure after every breakfast! The printing office The Oldehove is another widely-known Leeuwarden company named after the tower. In the past, Boomsma made beerenburg (liquor) with the tower on its label.

Many artists have drawn or painted the Oldehove. A well-known example is the work of art by Douwe Idema, purchased by the municipality in 1994 for 4,000 guilders. Another famous painting was made by G.B.J. Westermann in 1906. It shows the Oldehove Churchyard with the ropewalk and in the background, the Oldehove. In 2006, art group Bedenkers en Uitvoerders van Buitengewone Gebeurtenissen (BUOG) (Creators and Performers of Extraordinary Events) organised a number of performances about a lighthouse keeper on the Middle Sea. The Oldehove was transformed into a lighthouse, with a real rotating light, and served as the theatre itself. Theatre producer Jan-Dirk van Ravesteijn (of MuzeMotie and Acta) brought Mooi Mislukt (Nicely Failed) out in 2010. This one-man musical was also performed in the tower.

The Oldehove was also frequently used in literature. The Frisian writer T. Velstra wrote in 1910 the play It Heechste Rjucht ef De Bouwmaster fen de Aldehou (The Highest Law or The Architect of the Oldehove). In 1957, De Boumaster fan de Aldehau was performed outdoors at the Oldehove Churchyard. It had been adapted by S.J. van der Molen and Piter Terpstra. The famous Frisian writer Douwe Tamminga devoted a novel to the architect Van Aaken. Author Simon Vestdijk wrote the poem De wraak van den Oldehove (The Revenge of the Oldehove).

The image of the Oldehove pops up everywhere throughout the city. When locals portray themselves on the internet, they regularly put an Oldehove on their Hyves, Facebook or Twitter accounts. People from Leeuwarden have even had the tower tattooed on their body. In the neighbourhood De Wielenpôle, little Oldehoves can be found standing in several gardens.
Billboard for the tobacco factory De Oldehove of the Taconis firm, circa 1930.
colophon

data

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